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AUTHOR Mould, Claire
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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the background of an early years training program being implemented in inner city and rural settings in the United Kingdom. The paper is based on 5 years of observations, interviews, meetings, and training initiatives with educators and parents. In their comments, educators and parents often attributed their lack of participation in training to external constraints such as lack of time rather than to lack of interest. Program developers decided that in order to genuinely reflect the rights, interests, and needs of the children and adults, an open, flexible, and visionary attitude toward development and learning had to be adopted. It was necessary to think deeply about genuine accessibility and to question some elements of traditional training structures. Further research focused more specifically on the significance of the process of adults continuing to develop and learn, and analysis emphasized the importance and complexity of the concept of personal and professional well-being in development and learning. Nurturance of confidence, trust, and expectation provided the focus for initial supportive intervention. Program developers learned that throughout the implementation of such programs, the development and learning process must be stimulated through a sensitive context in which the needs, capabilities, and aspirations of individuals are shared and valued. (EV)

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Reaching Out for Lifelong Learning
A discussion paper

This discussion outlines the evolution of an early years' training programme that is being implemented from inner city and rural early years settings in the UK. This outreach initiative has extended from my experience of working collaboratively, as a researcher, with early years' educators, children and parents. Following a detailed development and learning needs analysis, proposals to fully fund accredited and unaccredited early years courses, encompassing additional costs, such as course fees, childcare and supply cover, was secured. A comparative study co-ordinating the implementation of this pilot training framework in differing geographical areas and outreach locations will be carried out over the next twelve months. However, as indicated, this paper will focus on the significant issues that have emerged as this programme evolved, and the subsequent fundamental factors that our experience has indicated should to underpin lifelong development and learning initiatives. In short, it will describe the first challenging processes we went through to transform the rhetoric to reality.

Throughout a five year collaboration children's and adults' development and learning experiences have been evaluated through a series of observations, interviews, meetings and training initiatives. This evidence has illustrated the need to create a collaborative development and learning programme that is committed to creating a learning environment within the local community where children, parents and educators feel equally welcomed and valued. Extending from this perspective we began to explore why currently only a small percentage of individuals were pursuing training opportunities. Feedback from parents and educators indicated that their lack of participation is not simply due to lack of interest, but often as a result of personal constraints. It was apparent that in order to genuinely reflect the rights, interests and needs of the children and adults an open, flexible and visionary attitude toward development and learning had to be adopted. We therefore needed to think

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deeply about genuine accessibility and question some elements of traditional training structures.

Extending from this analysis I focused my research more specifically on the significance of the process of adults continuing developing and learning. This involved a heightened frequency of exchange with the adults who interact with the children. To minimise the risk of this dialogue being perceived as a formal researcher-led initiative these discussions mostly took place during the tidying up of resources, standing in the playground or over a cup of coffee.

The analysis of these meetings emphasised the significance and complexity of the concept of personal and professional 'well being'* in development and learning. I observed that the individuals who demonstrated a high level of well being were not so susceptible to pessimistic thoughts and negative energies when asked about their development. It was interesting that when asked about possible limitations these individuals identified external, rather than personal reasons for limiting their development, such as lack of time and access to resources. In each of these cases there was a sense of self belief that if the external restrictions were addressed then they would be able to excel to their full potential.

Endeavouring to support this growth has illustrated the essentially transient nature of intrinsic motivation and the complexity of maintaining this achievement. Our experience has indicated that when there is a symbiotic negotiation between self perceived ability and aspiration, and external support and stimulation, individuals are motivated to develop within a context of hope, meaning and purpose. The actual process of development may often be challenging but persistent, active participation appears to be intrinsically legitimised through the dogged belief that success is within our reach. However, once the

* The concept of Well Being encompasses self awareness, intrinsic motivation, empathy, and the ability to understand and manage one's own and other emotions.

initial vision is actualised and the feeling of self fulfilment celebrated, a sense of disequilibrium often begins to emerge. This state is not conducive to a productive working environment and demands an appropriate stimuli to facilitate an internalised balance. When an equilibrium is not promptly restored initial feelings of frustration or anxiety can gradually became submerged by apathy and despondence. If an individual's well being continues to fall the disparity between perceived ability, aspiration and reality can grow and become harder to stabilise. When in this state there is a risk of getting caught in a 'spiral of despair' when even potentially virtuous contributions are met with scepticism or dejection.

It has been through a deeper evaluation of my exchanges with the individuals who showed these signs of anxiety and self doubt that an insight into the fundamental factors that underpin the process of continued development and learning was gained. This group, who were predominately parents and support assistants, were initially reluctant to participate in development opportunities. They emerged as needing a deeper, more immediate level of support, it was not enough to simply change the terminology from 'problem' to 'challenge'. Our project emphasised that the facilitation of coherent and continuous progression involves the sensitive identification, addressing and removal of 'demotivators'. Individuals need to be stimulated to embark on a challenge with the hope that they will be travelling a meaningful, purposeful journey. People were motivated by achievable challenges, when they believed in themselves, when there was hope. The nurturance of confidence, trust and expectation was illustrated as the foundation of this evolutionary process, and provided the focus of our initial supportive intervention.

Further informal discussions with the individuals who demonstrated a low level of well being illustrated that the prevailing demotivators included:

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- **lack of confidence;**
  I left school without any exams. I'm not very confident about my ability to put down my ideas in writing
- **lack of personal support;**
  My partner doesn't really like me working and feels I already spend too much time at school
  I would really like to be involved but often it would cause problems in personal relationships at home
- **a feeling of 'no future here';**
  I'm just worried that it will all end in tears or that it goes nowhere
- **feeling unimportant;**
  I don't think other adults appreciate what I am capable of
- **feelings of guilt about doing something for themselves;**
  Being a single parent I think my own family should come first
  The children are growing up now and but I still have to face a lot of their problems as they grow up and should be there for them

One parent simply stated that,

- **some days I wish I could stay inside the house and lock myself away.**

To ignore these personal constraints when planning development opportunities would restrict access and contribute to the creation of an exclusive learning society. In order to provide a relevant and accessible framework for development we have to understand the reality of the everyday, with all its demands and potential frustrations. There has to be a meaningful relationship between the content of training initiatives, learning opportunities and audience. It is important to build on initial expertise, acknowledging the experience individuals bring as a cause for celebration rather than concern. As Handy (1997) observes 'life is a journey, which starts at home' (p.265), there is no better place to start than where we are.

More time was subsequently invested in giving voice and visibility to those who are closest to the experience, creating an environment in which individuals felt confident about

expressing their opinions on how we could make opportunities more accessible. The most common responses included:

- **having more information regarding the various development pathways available;**
  Can I progress any further in this setting ?
  If I knew what role was waiting for me to fill I could answer - I seem to float about my future as I don't know where I can go
- **keeping the language free from jargon and complex terminology;**
  Make the training information more understandable
  Why are there always such difficult words ? I just give up ... I can't even understand what it says half the time
- **highlighting the fact that lifelong learning is not a linear, chronological concept;**
  If I was a lot younger I'd do it but there doesn't seem a lot of point now
  I wish I'd been given the opportunity years ago ... it seems too late now
- **acknowledging the personal demands already placed on individuals;**
  If I had extra help at home I think I would be better off
  In my personal case I think the only answer for me is to get rid of my partner, but at the moment this isn't an option
- **being non threatening and non judgmental.**
  I also feel that my son's behaviour does reflect on me
  They probably all think I'm a bad mother anyway ... but I am doing my best

Following this shared dialogue I have continued to meet regularly with individuals to discuss their development and learning experiences, needs, inspirations and aspirations. The content of these discussions have reinforced that any programme that is genuinely reaching out to meet the individuals, at their point of need, through community based initiatives has to be as unique as the potential participants. Our experience has reinforced that throughout the implementation of these programmes the development and learning process must be stimulated through a sensitive context through which the needs, capabilities and aspirations of individuals are shared and valued.

Within the secure, meaningful learning environment we have had to establish, the individuals who had initially been anxious and self doubting, indicated their willingness to participate in outreach initiatives. As their confidence grew, this group became more articulate about their personal motivation to develop. As with the rest of our communications this dialogue was

incredibly honest and highly insightful. The reasons given for wanting to continue their learningincluded:

- *since I have become involved it has done wonders for my self esteem and confidence;*
- *I am beginning to feel that I am capable and good at my job and I feel valued by the people I work with;*
- *a big part of what motivates me to continue is to prove to myself that I can do it;*
- *to be honest, I have a partner who constantly tells me how stupid, ignorant and incapable I am, I am determined to prove him wrong;*
- *I have never finished anything in my life - I did my mock exams but wouldn't take any real exams, I did hairdressing and I only had 6 months left and I would have been qualified but I left. I didn't have the confidence - no self worth, I want to finish something;*
- *I want my children to have a good role model;*
- *I want to be part of life, doing things for me.*

These participants genuinely appreciated the firm foundation from which they were now able to extend. They have come to see this investment in their development and learning as part of a far longer term plan. When asked about their aspirations the responses included:

- *I want to come off income support, go to work and begin to stand on my own two feet;*
- *I think I worry a lot of how people think of me, how my children think of me, I want them to be proud of me;*
- *to know that I have done my best and tried to change myself and my way of life in the coming years;*
- *I would like to develop the women's group more, do more courses i.e. counselling / supporting women / children in domestic violence so I can support others and give them a chance like I've had;*
- *I want to become successful and confident in my career and general life because what I am doing now will reflect on my children (I hope) and on my future.*

Parting consideration

As this paper draws to a close it is important to state that ultimately the evolution of this outreach programme has illustrated that if you are to optimise the potential of your experience then you must enjoy your travelling. We have drawn from the Greek philosophers who state that it is during leisure time that we become truly human by devoting time to self-development. It is interesting that the Greek term for leisure, 'scholea', is the root from which the English word 'school' derives. We have been keen to create an environment that unites leisure and learning. A climate that evokes feelings of enjoyment

and enthusiasm rather than anxiety and self doubt. As Handy (1997) states 'we need a taste of the sublime, to lift our hearts, to give a hint of something bigger than ourselves and of the infinite possibilities of life. (p.109)'. Picasso said that 'Art blows away the everyday cobwebs from the soul'. We hope that the opportunities offered throughout our programme will awaken feelings of awe and 'blow away the cobwebs', as we continue to celebrate adults and children sharing the wonder and excitement of lifelong learning.

A parting thought

"The pleasure of learning, of knowing, and of understanding is a crucial feeling that must be reinforced so that the pleasure survives even when reality may prove that learning, knowing, and understanding involve difficulty and effort. It is in this very capacity for survival that pleasure is transformed into pure joy"

Loris Malaguzzi 1996

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Correspondence regarding this paper should be sent to:

Dr Claire Mould

Centre for Research in Early Childhood

St. Johns, Worcester,

UK

WR2 6AJ

email: Docmould@AOL.COM